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The Movement Toward Church Unity in Local Communities

A Summary of Experience in the Field of Co-operation

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Foreword

This little pamphlet undertakes to summarize the conclusions which have been wrought out through experience in the field of local church cooperation. It is dominated by no commitment to ideals. Ideals, however, have been the inspiration of the experiences, the results of which are here combined.

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THE theological content of sectarianism is disappearing. The movement has been in progress for a half century, indeed since the Civil War, but has been most rapid during the last twenty-five years. This Great War, through which we have just passed, has given it decisive impetus. Where sectarianism now survives, it is usually of an administrative character, rather than doctrinal, based upon a pride of organization and efficiency rather than in creeds or distinguishing dogmas.

This shifting of emphasis has quickened the tendency toward the unity of Christian forces in small communities. The movement has passed through the following stages:

To Stop Waste of Resources.

I. First in historical order there has been a recognition of the waste of resources due to the competition of small churches, and the maintenance of sectarian groups. The utter failure of denominational competition, has been most clearly demonstrated in the state of Ohio, through studies carried on by Rev. C. O. Gill, and published under the joint authorship of Mr. Gill and Hon. Gifford Pinchot in a book called "Six Thousand Country Churches." All over the nation this waste and failure have been noted; but in the state of Maine the first organization to seek distinctly a cooperative plan as a substitute for wasteful and destructive competition was formed as early as 1890. After thirty years of testing, the principles then laid down are acknowledged to be still sound and valid

as far as they go. Men who have been ministered to in war by protestant chaplains of many churches, and even by Catholics and Jews, are not prepared to support needless churches which duplicate each other's efforts.

II. As a remedy for the ills of sectarianism, communities have tried the "union church," and many are using now the name "community church," meaning often times in reality the same as "union church," despite the different designation. When a church bears no denominational name, has no connection with denominational organizations and enterprises, and in creedal position avoids distinctions and tests, or is neutral toward them, or endeavors to be inclusive of all, it is in effect a union church, whatever may be the name it carries.

Arraignment of the Union Church.

A second step toward unity has come in a clear recognition that the "union church," though designed to promote unity, does not secure the unity desired. Against the union church have arisen out of experience eight irrefutable and fatal charges:

(1) Without the usual associational fellowships and friendships, which Christian organizations require, it lacks occasion for the expression of allegiance, loyalty and devotion.

(2) It lacks adequate outside advice and supervision, with expert and technical help and guidance at critical periods, from Bishop, Superintendent, Secretary, or other denominational leader.

(3) It is subject more than other churches are to deception and abuse from unprincipled and unworthy pastors and preachers, because obliged to secure ministers from the foot-loose variety.

(4) Neither for itself, nor for its Sunday School, has the union church a literature, which is produced by its own associates; and it helps produce none.

(5) The union church promotes no institutions for education, religious or secular, in any large and statesmanlike way. It has therefore, within itself few of the incentives toward light and learning which other churches have.

(6) The union church is impoverished in its religious ideals, because it has no agencies of its own in its behalf, carrying on the great enterprises of home and foreign missions.

(7) Usually the union church lacks a complete system of truth, due to the fact that in its desire to include all and offend none it does not care to express, and so fails to cultivate, deep religious convictions.

(8) The union church, built up of unlike elements, fails in so many instances to evince the spirit of unity and accord, as to have gathered unto itself a reputation for being illiberal, divisive, and quarrelsome.

In the state of Massachusetts are reported more union churches, frankly so-called, than in any other state. These, less than two score in number, hold an annual conference, and, under the guidance of the Massachusetts Federation of Churches, seek to secure the advantages of joint fellowship. Their success is not such as materially to weaken the charges against the union church.

Federated Churches Serve Temporary Purposes.

III. A third step which has been taken is in the form of an experiment with what is called "*The Federated Church.*"

To be clear on this point we must distinguish between three uses of this term, "The Federated Church." First, there is the proper use, when two or more churches, each preserving its own organization and connection with its own denomination, unite in some, or all, of their functions under the pastoral care of one man, or one staff of men.

Then secondly there is the looser, less exact use of the term, to describe an organization of individuals who, while retaining membership in earlier churches of their choice, unite in a new church, usually as a temporary expedient, perhaps while in a foreign city, as in the capitals of Europe where many reside for a time, in student communities, in camps, or in cities like Cristobal and Balboa of the Canal Zone. Such churches as these supply a real need under conditions of temporary residence. In their localities, they are similar to "Union Churches," yet differ from them in the important respect of being inter-related, rather than unrelated, to denominations. Strictly speaking, instead of being called "Federated Churches," they should be called *Churches of Federated Christians.*

Then in the third place, the term "Federated Church" has been applied very loosely to almost any kind of a church combination in which different elements have been consolidated even though the result is in fact an ordinary denominational church. A kind of trade value is thought by some people to inhere in the name.

There has been a very strong impulse toward the formation of federated churches. The overhead movements of the last twenty-five years have been in this direction; and the development of that community consciousness,

which during the war brought all people, even of the most diverse types, together in cooperative movements, has helped emphasize the tendency.

Yet the federated church has been on trial long enough, and fairly enough, to satisfy most of its friends, as well as all of its enemies, that it is not the final step toward unity in the local community.

The reasons for discrediting the Federated Church, if set forth in array, would probably be somewhat as follows:

1. A Federated Church at its best is a kind of makeshift and not a final settlement. It is in a state of unstable equilibrium because of a half dozen fluctuating conditions and influences. The question of the pastorate involves recurring adjustments of denominational connection and influence. New members must decide which denominational church they will join, and then the balance of strength is disturbed; or if converts elect to join the "Federation" itself, then an anomalous and unplanned for "union church" is projected into the midst of the several denominational churches, with a resulting confusion and uneasiness in the minds of the saints.

Or, if the Federated Church gets happily by the perplexities of changing pastors and receiving new members, it may come at any moment upon the pitfalls of adjusting denominational benevolences and financial responsibilities, because of varying needs, and new campaigns, or by reason of bequests, or because meeting houses burn down, or decay and must be repaired, and all of the other material and temporal exigencies emerge.

Or some outside influence, unreckoned with and unanticipated, may intrude at any

moment, by the dictum of an ecclesiastical officer of one of the several varieties, or by the expressed wishes of former members, or because of the ambitions of some prominent citizens.

2. A verdict against the Federated Church often rests upon the suspicion that behind it is the intention of one of the parties to take advantage of the others, and by strategy bring them all into a single denominational camp, with obvious gain to that one denomination. When a suspicion of subterfuge, or of ulterior motives, lingers in any mind, enthusiasm for, and fidelity to, that enterprise vanish.

The history of Federated Churches has, we regret to acknowledge, caused many of its former friends to lose faith in it. The thing itself may not be wrong, but it has been used in too many instances for unworthy ends and has thereby become discredited.

3. Then there is the difficulty, and some would call it an impossibility, of keeping up a divided allegiance with impartiality. The Federated Church requires of many people a continued poise of judgment and protracted practice of equity and fair play, for which not all people are adequately equipped. The one pastor who serves two or more organizations, blended as one congregation, must deal justly and impartially with all. If bias, or prejudice, or predilection tincture his ministry, the sense of injustice may develop into resentment, and revolt follow. Committees in the administration of their different duties and influential people, as they serve and lead, must likewise evince the spirit of equity and goodwill, else the federation will fail. So long as human nature is imperfect the utility of the Federated Church will fluctuate with

the varying degrees of judicial-mindedness and goodwill to be found in different communities. The Federated Church itself is not a cure-all nor a mend-all.

There are doubtless several hundred Federated Churches in the United States, in varying stages of activity and inactivity. In the office of the Home Mission Council is a list of about three hundred.

The Denominational Church Functioning for the Community.

IV. The phrase, "The Community Church," has lately come into prominence. Great community enterprises, unparalleled in the history of our country, occasioned by the war, have prepared men for working together. If they can meet together, plan together, conduct great drives for patriotic service, can they not also worship together? If the people can function in a community Red Cross, and a community enlistment bureau, why not in a Community Church?

We must look first to definitions.

The term "The Community Church," is not yet definitely and distinctly used. Sometimes it is applied to a Federated Church; sometimes it means nothing more than a denominational church, which has institutional features; at other times it is naught else than the old-fashioned "union church," branded with a new name; and then again church promoters sometimes use the phrase as a trade mark to catch the goodwill of people who are looking for a church of a broad and liberal type, imbued with social instincts.

We should limit the term to the *functioning* of a church not to its form of organization, nor to its denominational connections, or lack of them. That church, which seeks to min-

ister to all the religious interests of a community, gathering to its fellowship and its services all the Christians of the community, of whatever name or characteristic, is a community church. How it is organized, or even how it is named, is less important than the question how does it minister? A Federated Church may be a Community Church, or it may fail to be a Community Church, even though it be the only church in the community, for if it fails to serve all of the religious interests of the community, and fails to include in its fellowship all of the Christians of the community, it fails to be a Community Church. On the other hand a denominational church may be a Community Church, in case it embraces in the scope of its interests, and of its ministries, all of the religious interests of the community, and includes in its fellowship all of the Christians of the community. It does not need to receive into full and equal membership all of the Christians of the community, but it must receive into its fellowship all, in such ways as to be satisfying to the social instincts of all and to call out the feeling of corporate responsibility of every Christian, conservative or radical, of one type or of another.

Here may be the difficulty, yet nevertheless here is the goal,—to serve all of varying talents and varying attainments even as Jesus Christ would serve them, with a toleration and a patience that are all-inclusive.

Many considerations may be urged in favor of the Community Church.

1. It is the New Testament type of church. The church of Corinth, the churches at Thessalonica, Colosse, Laodicea and at Rome appear to have been Community Churches,

inclusive of all the Christians in the cities, although some of them met at one time in one house or another, and some of them were even broken into factions, according as they followed more closely Paul, or Apollos, or Peter; or even used the name of Christ. Yet their Christian designation was one, and their fellowship was assumed to be one.

2. Practical experience of the years shows very plainly that the Community Church alone can adequately fulfil its mission. Others are more wasteful of resources; others foster division and competition, not to say strife, and so sacrifice their own essential characteristics. Communities have learned that it is not only easier, but is also more Christlike, to maintain in a small population one church which tolerates within itself every variety of Christian experience and attainment, than it is to maintain and tolerate different churches, each of which exists for a different type of Christian experience and attainment. Reconciliation and spiritual agreements can more readily be secured within a single group of Christians than they can be between several groups.

3. It has been becoming plain to the average man through a long term of years, and the effects of the war have hastened the process, that the validity of the church does not consist in doctrinal agreements. The war has had an immense effect upon men in making a few simple and far-reaching convictions controlling; and these few fundamentals seem to them common to all churches, and consequently the question of *which* church, amongst several, does not seem so important as it did to men of former days. The need of the church then is regarded more as resting upon its social and administrative functions than upon its distinctive doctrinal and sacramental

character. The common social functions of the church, which appeal to men are these:

a. It is a place of testimony, speaking to men of the deepest, the greatest, and the best things of life.

b. It is a social center for acquaintance and fellowship, where the human touch prevails.

c. However small it may be, it nevertheless is a great educational institution, in which the proclamation of truth, the explanation of the principles of life, and the inculcation of personal duties are constant themes.

d. However meagerly it may be equipped, it is yet a place of worship, where the deepest and most profound emotions are stirred, in the sense of awe and in expressions of adoration and praise.

e. The local church is a means of ministry and service unto the community,—the combination of Christians in united good will and good deeds.

These are cogent reasons, which justify the church in the community to practically all men.

The Mediating Ministry of the Community Church.

V. A perplexing problem now remains:—How can the Community Church serve its community adequately, and at the same time not itself become limited to its community? Can it be locally efficient without at the same time becoming provincial? The mind of Christ cannot be in men, unless they think and they love with something of his universal inclusiveness. Can a church be both local and catholic?

The answer to this perplexing problem must be sought in two directions, in the direction

of the spirit of the Church and in the direction of its relation to other organizations:

1. As regards its own spirit the church must evince breadth of fellowship, which may be described as follows:

a. It must allow the right of private judgment. It will not then insist upon absolute conformity to a single standard.

b. It will freely entertain varieties within its fellowship, without seeking to reduce differences to the level of flat uniformity; it will rather endeavor to include variations within the unity of a higher synthesis.

The plan of the so-called "Concordat," between Congregationalists and Episcopalians, in accordance with which a Congregational minister may receive a second ordination at the hands of an Episcopal bishop, in order to render his administration of the sacraments acceptable to Episcopalians, is a striving toward this higher synthesis.

c. By its sympathetic inclusiveness it may cultivate that best form of individualism which finds itself in group consciousness.

d. If its principles seem to preclude full membership for all the variant kinds of Christian conviction and experience within the community, then it will make some adequate provision for satisfactory affiliation, which will permit it to be what a church should be to every Christian of the Community in the five social ways which have been enumerated.

In the plan of cooperation, which was put into operation in the State of Montana in 1919, it was fully recognized that those people who ordinarily gave social allegiance to a church serving alone a community for the sake of administrative efficiency, should have the care and compensation, for the sake of

conscience and conviction, of occasional ministries by the ecclesiastics of their own choice. This is the meaning of one of the principles enunciated in the following terms:

"Occasional ministry by any co-operating denomination to small groups of adherents of that communion is not to be regarded as infringement on the one hand nor as occupancy of fields on the other."

2. As far as its relations to outside organizations are concerned, four attitudes may be taken by the local church.

a. It may take the attitude of self-sufficient isolation, disclaiming all responsibility for any person, or anything, outside itself and its community. But in this case, while it may continue to perform the local functions of a church, it will lose the missionary and generative spirit of a Christian church, and will soon cease to be Christian in the fullest sense of the word. A church cannot remain Christian, which thinks only of itself and ministers only to the interests of its own immediate environment, any more than a man can continue to be a Christian, in the full meaning of the term, if he limits all his interests to himself and his family. The church must have vision; it must love as Jesus loved; "the mind of Christ" was not limited to one locality. The Church which loses its world-vision and missionary zeal and devotion, fails to be a true Christian Church.

b. It may respond to the appeals of a spontaneous and sporadic character,—to pray for and to give to occasional needs, such as those brought to public attention by reason of floods, earthquakes, fires, pestilence, famine, and other great misfortunes and calamities; or by societies which do good solely on the humanitarian plane; or by organizations which push some

partial and distorted propaganda. In much of the generosity thus elicited, there is no little real Christian benevolence and virtue; but it is not of the steadiest and strongest kind, nor does it possess the proportion and balance of those great missionary societies, which have grown up under denominational care, through the refining experiences of failures and successes of many generations.

c. It may endeavor, as a Federated Church, to yield allegiance to several missionary societies, and groups of societies,—a society or a group, for each of the denominations represented in the Federated Church. Its success may be well proportioned and satisfactory; but the difficulties and dangers, as the years pass, are not few. Special appeals and special "drives" by one denomination, or by another, may disturb the balance and produce disquietude. Changes of pastors and of committees may alter the emphasis and destroy an equitable adjustment. Strife may arise if the question of fixing the ratios must come up periodically. All of these, and other disturbances may impend.

d. But the safest, the securest, the most satisfactory way is for a community church to be connected with a single denomination, if this be in any way possible.

Is it possible? Can a Community Church be a denominational church, and as such (a) serve well its own community, meeting the needs of all of the Christians in the community and (b) at the same time extend its interests, its devotions, its prayers and its benevolences, out through the channels of a single denomination unto all the religious needs of the world?

The answer is, yes—assuredly yes. There are scores, probably hundreds, of churches,

adequately meeting all of these conditions, both within the community, and outwardly unto the world's needs, and the prevailing type is the denominational church which has become community-minded.

The tendency of the war has not been away from doctrine and creeds of the broad and comprehensive kind, but has been toward a reduction of the number of doctrines or beliefs in a creed which are deemed important, and the smaller number of great beliefs to hold to are found present in most of the creeds of the churches; so that now men, less than formerly, care for the denominational name of the church in which they worship so much, as they do for the character of its community service and the outreach and efficiency of the denominational organizations. This means that denominations seem less like depositories of truth and more like administrative organs of efficiency.

VI. We have now reached an answer to some of the questions which confront us. The tendency toward unity in local communities is toward that kind of unity which embraces Christians of diverse types within the fellowship of a single church, and that bearing a denominational name, but broadened in sympathy and in ministry to the extent of the needs of the entire community.

And we are where the very circumstances give exhortation to three classes of people:

1. The time has come for advising all churches, particularly those in small settlements, and most emphatically that church which is the only church in a community, to enlarge the terms of its fellowship, if not the terms of its membership, by dropping those exclusive and sectarian tests which would shut worthy Christians out of its companionship

in work and worship. A church which will not include in its fellowship all worthy Christians has no right to occupy exclusively a single field. It should include all, else it should give way to the church which will. We can no longer tolerate more than one church in a community of the one-church size, and there is a tendency to put the population of one thousand as the community which should have but one church. And when one Christian church is alone in a place the necessity upon it of serving every Christian interest of the place seems apparent. No one should require the violation of conscience by any church which has distinctive requirements for admission to church membership, such as Baptists, Disciples, Episcopalians, Lutherans, or others may have, but such churches can at least make their *fellowship* broad enough and inclusive enough to receive all who should be received. Many of these churches are doing this already. The exhortation for every church thus to enlarge its spirit is strong,—indeed, it is almost a warning that unless the church, which seeks alone to serve a community, shall do so, its doom has been written, "weighed and found wanting."

2. It must be acknowledged that a very large number of churches have all the impulses and purposes to serve their communities adequately, but are hindered, if not entirely prevented, by the superior administrative officers above them, by the men who care for the interests of the ecclesiastical organization next above the local church,—the District, the Conference, the Association, the Convention, the Synod, the Presbytery, the Classis, or the Diocese. With these men other matters are in mind; they are thinking of associational and

denominational strength, of statistical returns, and the recompense of faithful administration. These men are less ready to recognize community conditions and needs than are pastors and resident church members. They, more than any other class of responsible administrators of church affairs, prevent the very thing at which most of us are arriving, the abolition of waste, and the extension of Christian comity, for they are insisting upon the rigors of denominational ties for the sake of holding to denominational possessions, not recognizing that the compensations of enlarged fellowship may be as great as are its losses.

For all of these men a particular device has been employed, called the plan of "Reciprocal Exchanges," which helps make the fact of immediate compensation apparent. By this plan when one denomination gives up its members and work in one community, to another denomination, then another community is sought in which conditions are reversed, so that the denomination which before yielded may now gain and the denomination, which in the former case gained, may now make the concession. This plan first proposed, and put into operation in Maine, has been approved by many bodies, including the Home Missions Council and the Commission on Interchurch Federations of the Federal Council, and has been put into operation in several states. It is the very nerve center of the plans which have been carried out so successfully in Vermont. The sense of fair play and equity takes away a large share of the stings of concession, surrender and loss.

3. Out of the experiences of the church in moving toward unity in local communities, comes a message for the leaders of the denominations at large. The message is this:

No little movement toward unity in a remote, or apparently insignificant place, fails to affect the strength and vitality of the very head center of the denomination itself, and all of these movements, of which there is an increasing host, utter a warning that the head centers must give heed to greater cooperation and closer federations among themselves.

The meaning of this message may be put somewhat in detail as follows:

a. Denominational headquarters are not now leaders of thought, as they used to be. They are administrators for efficiency and not the custodians of orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is now more nearly common property, the substance of belief, which all denominations hold.

b. The little church, and the sum total of little churches, are essential for denominational efficiency, and whatever the little church does must be in accord with the larger plans of the denomination.

c. But when the little church finds it needful, for the sake of fulfilling its true Christian mission, to carry out policies which are not exclusively sectarian, or denominational, then the denomination, to preserve its own integrity and efficiency, must at the top consider plans tending toward cooperation and federation, of which the movements of the little church are a part.

d. These movements of the little churches toward unity require the head centers to think and plan in their behalf. Community churches should not be stopped. Indeed they cannot be stopped; but they should now be anticipated and planned for, with wisdom which discerns all needs and takes all factors into account.

e. Denominations now existing must plan to "mother and father" these community churches

in a broad and charitable spirit, else they may be sure that a new organization will arise which will give them a fostering care. They will get together and create their own overhead organization, which will be equivalent to the creation of a new denomination of interdenominationalism.

f. For safety's sake, denominations must move in unison. If the head moves without its following, then the movement is a division, and sects are multiplied. If the lesser parts go off, while the head stays unchanged, then the strength of the head is diminished, and it will fail.

g. The time has come for the heads to get together for the lesser parts are coming together. Nearly all things prove this. We have had the Foreign Missionary Conference of North America, including practically all Foreign Mission Boards, for twenty-five years. We have had the Home Missions Council, and the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, for twelve years. The World Conference on Faith and Order has been in progress since 1910. The American Council on Organic Union has spent two years in thoughtful planning. The Interchurch World Movement grew like a giant almost over night.

These things are significant. In only one of these movements is there an attempt to define faith, or its content. In all of them men are seeking efficiency.

This great movement toward administrative unity is on. It manifests itself in little communities, and runs through the entire church.